



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations

Christopher M. Blanchard

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

April 29, 2015

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RL33533

CRS REPORT

Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>				
1. REPORT DATE 29 APR 2015	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2015 to 00-00-2015		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Congressional Research Service,The Library of Congress,101 Independence Ave, SE,Washington,DC,20540			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 25
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	

Summary

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ruled by the Al Saud family since its founding in 1932, wields significant global political and economic influence through its administration of the birthplace of the Islamic faith and by virtue of its large oil reserves. Close U.S.-Saudi official relations have survived a series of challenges since the 1940s, and, in recent years, shared concerns over Sunni Islamist extremist terrorism and Iranian regional ambitions have provided a renewed logic for continued strategic cooperation. Political upheaval and conflict in the Middle East and North Africa appear to have strained bilateral ties, but their full effect has yet to be determined.

Amid regional turmoil, Obama Administration officials have referred to the Saudi government as an important regional partner in recent years, and U.S. arms sales and related security cooperation programs have continued with congressional oversight. Since October 2010, Congress has been notified of proposed sales to Saudi Arabia of fighter aircraft, helicopters, missile defense systems, missiles, bombs, armored vehicles, and related equipment and services, with a potential value of more than \$90 billion. In March and April 2015, the U.S.-trained Saudi military used U.S.-origin weaponry, U.S. logistical assistance, and shared intelligence to carry out strikes in Yemen. Some Members of Congress have expressed skepticism about Saudi leaders' commitment to combating extremism and sharing U.S. policy priorities. However, U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism ties reportedly remain close, and Saudi forces have participated in coalition strikes on Islamic State targets in Syria since 2014.

In parallel to these close security ties, official U.S. concerns about human rights and religious freedom in the kingdom persist, and, in part, reflect deeper concerns for the kingdom's stability. Saudi activists advance a range of limited economic and political reform demands, continuing trends that have seen liberals, moderates, and conservatives publicly press the kingdom's leaders for change for decades. Since 2011, initiatives to organize nationwide protests have been met with some popular criticism and official rejection. Local protests occur sporadically, but public clashes with security forces have remained contained to certain predominantly Shia areas of the oil-rich Eastern Province. The Obama Administration has endorsed Saudi citizens' rights to free assembly and free expression. Saudi leaders reject foreign interference in the country's internal affairs.

The death of King Abdullah bin Abdelaziz in January 2015 brought to a close a long chapter of consistent leadership, and his half-brother King Salman bin Abdelaziz assumed leadership of the kingdom. He has moved quickly to assert his authority by reorganizing several government entities, naming new heirs and officials, and distributing public funds. Succession arrangements have attracted particular attention in recent years, as senior leaders in the royal family have passed away or faced reported health issues and a series of appointments and reassessments has altered the responsibilities and relative power of leading members of the next generation of the Al Saud family, the grandsons of the kingdom's founder.

Current U.S. policy seeks to coordinate with Saudi leaders on regional issues and help them respond to domestic economic and security challenges. Time will tell whether U.S. initiatives and, more importantly, Saudi leaders' efforts will ensure stability. Shared security challenges have long defined U.S.-Saudi relations, and questions about political, economic, and social reform may become more pertinent in light of the calls for change and patterns of conflict that are now swirling around the kingdom. Saudi assertiveness in confronting perceived threats may affect U.S. regional security priorities, including with regard to Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and negotiations with Iran in the near future. In turn, Congress may examine the scope, terms, and merits of U.S.-Saudi partnership as it considers proposed arms sales and security commitments.

Contents

Overview.....	1
Domestic Issues	3
Leadership and Succession.....	4
Cabinet Shifts, Declining Oil Prices, and Consistent Budget Priorities	5
Gender Issues, Minority Relations, and Human Rights	7
Terrorism Threats and Bilateral Cooperation.....	8
The Islamic State and Related Security Issues	9
Terrorist Financing and Material Support: Concerns and Responses.....	10
U.S. Foreign Assistance to Saudi Arabia.....	11
Arms Sales and Security Training	11
Consensus and Contention in Regional Affairs	13
Saudi Arabia and Iran	13
Saudi Military Campaigns and Policy in Yemen.....	14
Egypt and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.....	17
U.S.-Saudi Trade and Energy Issues.....	18
Outlook.....	20

Figures

Figure 1. Saudi Arabia: Map and Country Data	2
--	---

Tables

Table 1. Proposed Major U.S. Defense Sales to Saudi Arabia.....	12
---	----

Appendices

Appendix. Historical Background	21
---------------------------------------	----

Contacts

Author Contact Information.....	21
---------------------------------	----

Overview

King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud succeeded his late half-brother King Abdullah in January 2015 and in April 2015 announced dramatic changes to succession arrangements left in place by King Abdullah, elevating the next generation of the ruling Al Saud family as heirs. In an April 28 decree, King Salman replaced his half-brother Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz with Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdulaziz, a nephew to both men and leading member of the generation of grandsons of the kingdom's founder. King Salman named his relatively young son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as Deputy Crown Prince in addition to the other influential roles he has held since January as Defense Minister and head of a new national economic council of ministers. Long-serving Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal stepped down and has been replaced by Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel al Jubeir. Military and civilian security officials received a month's pay bonus in conjunction with the announcements. The moves surprised many observers of the kingdom's affairs, but it is not immediately apparent that the leadership changes will result in major changes in Saudi domestic and foreign policy or Saudi-U.S. relations.

In spite of apparent differences of opinion over regional developments, U.S.-Saudi security cooperation and U.S. concern for the global availability of Saudi energy supplies continue to anchor official bilateral relations as they have for decades. Bilateral ties are bolstered by major new arms sales, continued security training arrangements, enhanced counterterrorism cooperation, and shared concerns about Iran, Al Qaeda, and, more recently, the rise of the group known as the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham/the Levant, ISIL/ISIS). The latter group's military advances in Syria and Iraq appear to have generated serious concern among Saudi officials, as have reports that suggest popular support for the group may be strong among a small but potentially dangerous minority of Saudis.

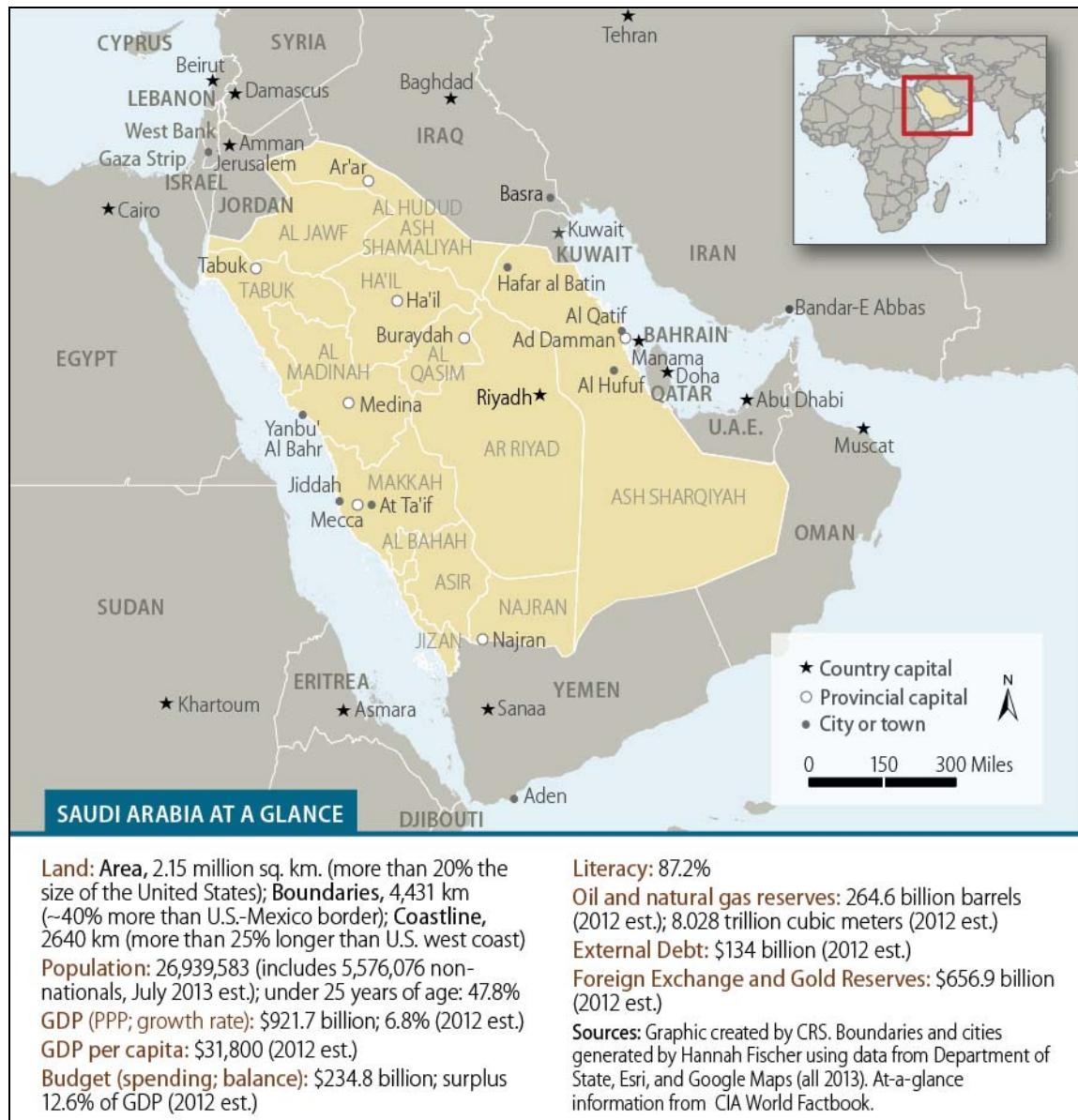
Saudi leaders have reacted viscerally to the ouster of Yemen's transitional government by the Zaydi Shia *Ansar Allah* (aka Houthi) movement and backers of former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. A U.S.-supported, Saudi-led air campaign has launched hundreds of strikes across the country since late March 2015 aimed at halting the advance of Houthi-Saleh forces and compelling them to negotiate with U.N.-recognized exiled transition leaders. Meanwhile Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, perhaps the kingdom's most dangerous local adversary, has taken advantage of the resulting disorder to reassert itself across southern Yemen.

U.S.-origin weaponry features prominently in Saudi military operations in Yemen and against the Islamic State organization in Syria, drawing new attention to congressionally approved arms sales. Since late 2012, the Administration has notified Congress of over \$24 billion in proposed arms sales to the kingdom, including proposed sales that would continue long-established training programs, upgrade legacy platforms, support critical infrastructure protection, and deliver advanced stand-off air weaponry to equip Saudi-purchased U.S. fighter aircraft. Parallel joint diplomatic efforts to build stronger economic, educational, and interpersonal ties are intended to broaden the basis of the bilateral relationship and help meet the demands and aspirations of the kingdom's young population for employment and more economic growth.

The Obama Administration, like its predecessors, has engaged the Saudi government as a strategic partner to promote regional security and global economic stability. Current U.S. policy initiatives seek to help Saudi leaders, under the leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz, address economic and security challenges. U.S. government statements warn of ongoing terrorist threats

in Saudi Arabia, and in February the State Department said that “security threats are increasing.”¹ U.S. officials have not indicated that they expect large-scale public unrest to emerge in the near term, but U.S. statements cite ongoing attacks against Westerners, including Americans, in the kingdom, identify no-go areas for U.S. diplomats, and describe attacks on Saudi borders by terrorist adversaries to the north and south.

Figure 1. Saudi Arabia: Map and Country Data



¹ U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs, Travel Warning - Saudi Arabia, February 24, 2015.

It is still unclear whether U.S. initiatives and, more importantly, Saudi leaders' own choices will enable the kingdom to meet its citizens' security, employment, energy consumption, and education needs. Its considerable financial clout and deepening energy ties to major U.S. trading partners in Asia are important factors for U.S. and Saudi decision makers to consider when assessing the future of the bilateral relationship. Significant shifts in the political and economic landscape of the Middle East also have focused greater international attention on Saudi domestic policy issues and reinvigorated social and political debates among Saudis. These shifts may make sensitive issues such as political reform, unemployment, education, human rights, corruption, religious freedom, and extremism more important to U.S.-Saudi relations than in the past.

However, the history of these bilateral ties suggests that any official U.S. criticisms of the kingdom's restrictive political and social environment or any perceived failings by the Saudi government to live up to its reform or counterterrorism commitments are likely to remain subjects of private diplomatic engagement rather than public discussion. Saudi concerns about U.S. leadership in the region appear to have grown in recent years, in parallel to U.S. concerns about Saudi priorities and choices. Leaders in both countries have long favored continuity over policy differences in the face of controversy and some Saudis' and Americans' calls for change. With a new generation of leaders assuming prominent positions in the kingdom, change is under way—its direction and implications remain to be seen.

Domestic Issues

U.S. officials credited the late King Abdullah's government with taking a more responsive and transparent approach to citizens' concerns than those of his predecessors, and observers are watching closely for signals indicating whether King Salman will continue that approach or adopt his own. Regardless of the new king's personal style, decision-making in the kingdom reflects consensus among a closed elite dominated by aging members of the Al Saud family. The government seeks to manage increasingly vocal and public demands for improved economic opportunities, political rights, and improved social conditions while security forces monitor and tightly limit political activity and social activism. The government launched large scale social spending programs targeting housing and unemployment in response to popular demands since 2011, and has expelled hundreds of thousands of foreign workers to boost employment of Saudis. The third nationwide municipal council elections are to be held in August-September 2015, and will expand the elected membership to two-thirds, lower the voter registration age to 18 from 21, and be the first in which Saudi women can vote and stand as candidates.

In 2013, former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia James Smith attributed what he viewed as an atmosphere of tension and anxiety among some Saudis and their leaders to the range of economic, social, political, and foreign policy challenges that the kingdom faces, saying:

on one hand you have those [Saudis] with a deep and abiding confidence in the kingdom—its religion, its culture, and they're excited about the future. On the other hand you have those who are deeply worried that somehow the culture is weak, that it is vulnerable, that social change might erode the very fabric of their society. The chorus of caution feels the need to control events, to keep out new ideas and outside views as if the proud heritage will be threatened.... As the Saudi leadership scans the neighborhood they see an uncertain future, political instability, economic chaos, refugee flows, and meddling from Iran and other

regional players. Domestically they see a demand for jobs, the need for energy alternatives, and requests for more freedom and opportunity. They have a full plate.²

In July 2014, Smith described the regional challenges facing the kingdom as “a maelstrom.”³ The months since have seen new pressures created by the Islamic State’s advance, King Abdullah’s death, the collapse of the Saudi-backed transitional government in neighboring Yemen, and continuing U.S.-Iranian negotiation over nuclear issues.

Leadership and Succession

Saudi leaders are likely to continue to face complex questions about political consent, economic performance, and social reform while managing leadership transitions that are now set to transfer power from the sons of the kingdom’s founder, King Abdelaziz, to his grandsons. By most accounts, the Al Saud family has managed a series of recent leadership transition decisions smoothly, and formal announcements of major changes in succession have stated that an Allegiance Council made up of senior family members has considered and endorsed recent transition decisions. This includes decisions made in the wake of King Abdullah’s death on January 22, 2015, and in conjunction with the succession and leadership changes announced on April 29. Saudi authorities state that Prince Muqrin bin Abdelaziz stepped down as Crown Prince at his own choosing and credit new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdelaziz with selecting King Salman’s son to serve as Deputy Crown Prince, with the approval of a majority of the Allegiance Council.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman hold a range of other positions, placing them in powerful roles to shape Saudi foreign and domestic policy, under King Salman’s overall guidance. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef has continued his duties as Minister of Interior and assumed leadership of a newly created Council for Political and Security Affairs in January. Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman became Defense Minister, head of the royal court, and the head of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs in January, ceding the royal court position to an adviser following his elevation to the chain of succession in April. King Salman created the new councils overseen by the princes to handle day-to-day decision making and raise issues for the council of ministers and king to resolve.

The April 2015 succession changes marked the clear reversal of a key decision taken by King Abdullah in the run-up to his death—he had named Prince Muqrin as Deputy Crown Prince in March 2014. In January King Salman also removed two of the late King Abdullah’s sons from key governorships, along with a prominent adviser of Abdullah’s—Khalid al Tuwaijiri. The late king Abdullah’s son Prince Abdelaziz bin Abdullah remains the Deputy Foreign Minister, but King Salman chose a close, but non-royal, adviser to the late king—long-time Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel al Jubeir—to replace ailing Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal. Prince Miteb bin Abdullah (King Abdullah’s most prominent son) leads the security forces of the Ministry of the National Guard. Debate among observers on these moves is still evolving, with some individuals suggesting that King Salman and his appointed successors are reversing some

² Ambassador James Smith (ret.), Remarks at National Council on U.S. Arab Relations Conference, October 2013.

³ Ambassador James Smith (ret.), Conversation with Saudi-U.S. Relations Information Service, July 14, 2014.

liberal initiatives launched under King Abdullah's tenure in a bid to shore up domestic support for generational leadership transition and a more independent and active Saudi foreign policy.⁴

In recent years there has been increased press reporting of competition among the grandsons of King Abdelaziz and clear indications that positions of influence were being redistributed among them. However, there are no clear public signals that the royal family is poised to revert to the level of tension that characterized intra-family relations in the mid-20th century, which divided supporters of King Saud (the first son to succeed King Abdelaziz) and King Faisal (the following successor). Prominent next-generation princes in government service include former intelligence director/former Saudi land forces commander/former deputy defense minister Prince Khalid bin Bandar; his brother, Qassim Province Governor Faisal bin Bandar; and Prince Saud bin Nayef and Prince Faisal bin Salman, governors of the Eastern Province and Medina Province, respectively.

One critic of the Saudi monarchy has warned that the division of security ministries among leading princes is an indicator that the future could reflect "a kingdom with multiple heads" and "a decentralized monarchy consisting of multiple fiefdoms."⁵ The ability of the monarchy's next generation to successfully manage their relationships with each other and with competing domestic interest groups is among the factors likely to determine the country's future stability, with direct implications for regional stability and U.S. national security and economic interests. Crown Prince and Minister of Interior Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdelaziz Al Saud, Minister of the National Guard Prince Miteb bin Abdullah bin Abdelaziz Al Saud, and then-Intelligence Chief Prince Khalid bin Bandar bin Abdelaziz Al Saud visited the United States for consultations with U.S. officials in 2014, and senior U.S. officials have engaged repeatedly with new leaders across the Saudi government on a range of regional issues in 2015. The succession and leadership changes announced on April 29 may raise the amount of scrutiny given to the planned May 2015 visit of King Salman and other leading Saudis to the United States for President Obama's summit with Arab Gulf leaders. Observers are likely to interpret the outcomes of the summit as signals about the direction of U.S.-Saudi relations and regional security.

Cabinet Shifts, Declining Oil Prices, and Consistent Budget Priorities

In public statements, Saudi leaders have highlighted continuing regional security threats and domestic economic challenges and have sought to project an image of continuity and consistency in outlining their diplomatic, economic, and security policy plans for 2015. A cabinet reshuffle in December 2014 under the late King Abdullah brought new leadership to the ministries of agriculture, communications and information technology, culture and information, health, higher education, Islamic affairs, social affairs, and transport.⁶ King Salman in turn appointed new leaders in the ministries of Islamic affairs, health, information, municipal affairs, justice, and agriculture, in addition to abolishing several state councils and replacing them with the overarching security and economic councils described above. Several of these ministries have

⁴ See, for example, Yaroslav Trofimov, "New Saudi King Brings Major Change at Home and Abroad," *Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2015.

⁵ Madawi al Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia's Unpredictable Succession Plan," *Al Monitor* (blog), April 23, 2013.

⁶ Background information on Saudi cabinet members is available at <http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/Biographies-of-Ministers.aspx>.

responsibility for government programs in areas where domestic popular demands are high, and close observers of Saudi domestic policy have described the successive leadership changes as indications of both leaders' desire to reinvigorate current policy approaches and place their own mark on the country's direction.

Drastic reductions in global market prices for crude oil are driving questions about Saudi Arabia's oil production plans and fiscal outlook. Prices for Brent crude oil and West Texas Intermediate crude oil dropped by more than half to roughly \$46 per barrel from June 2014 to January 2015. As of late-April 2015, prices were around \$64 per barrel, but Saudi oil officials signaled the kingdom intended to continue production of more than 10 million barrels per day in what many analysts view as a bid to increase its global market share. Saudi Arabia has enjoyed large budget surpluses in recent years as a result of formerly high oil prices, and the kingdom's leaders have used expansionary spending on social programs, housing, education, and infrastructure in a bid to prevent domestic unrest. Since 2011, the kingdom has approved a series of record annual budgets and launched major additional spending programs to meet economic and social demands that some feared could fuel stronger calls from citizens for political change.

Actual spending reached an all-time high in 2013, and the 2014 budget set a higher spending target than 2013, with 38% of total spending earmarked for education and healthcare initiatives. Defense and security spending exceeded 30% of the budget in 2013. The kingdom ran a budget deficit of \$14.4 billion in FY2014 as a result of a more than 28% increase in expenditures and declining oil revenues. The FY2015 budget presumes a slight increase in spending in spite of lower oil prices, and the Saudi Ministry of Finance expects that the kingdom will post a larger deficit of \$38.6 billion in FY2015. Approximately one-half of Saudi government expenditures support "salaries, wages, and allowances."⁷

Overall, analysts view recent Saudi budget and oil production decisions as indications that the kingdom's leaders are prepared to engage in deficit spending and draw on an estimated \$750 billion in foreign currency reserves.⁸ Some observers speculate that these decisions are driven by a desire to pressure adversaries in Iran and Russia, maintain Saudi Arabia's share in Asian oil markets, continue the growth of the non-oil sector at home, and reduce the economic viability of unconventional oil production in North America and other regions. Saudi officials, including Oil Minister Ali al Naimi, have stated that they do not expect oil prices to rebound to mid-2014 levels in the near future and that Saudi Arabia is positioned to weather pressures created by low oil prices better than other high-cost producers.⁹

In December 2013, an IMF official observed that significant Saudi labor force growth in the coming decade will require "a large increase in the absorption of nationals into private sector jobs ... to avoid an increase in unemployment." The kingdom's investments in the education sector are an acknowledgement of the challenges related to preparing the large Saudi youth population to compete and prosper in coming decades. It also is possible that a more educated and economically engaged youth population could make new social or political reform demands as

⁷ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Finance, "Press Release: Recent Economic Developments and Highlights of Fiscal Years 1435/1436 (2014) & 1436/1437 (2015)," December 25, 2014.

⁸ Jay Solomon and Summer Said, "Why Saudis Decided Not to Prop Up Oil, In American Shale Oil, A Perceived Threat to OPEC Market Share," Wall Street Journal, December 21, 2014.

⁹ Steven Mufson, "How low can oil prices go? Welcome to the oil market's old normal," *Washington Post* — Wonkblog Online, January 12, 2015.

well. In this regard, recent U.S. efforts to expand the number of Saudi students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities may have cumulative economic, social, and political effects in future decades. According to U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Joseph Westphal, as of mid-2014 there were more than 83,000 young Saudi men and women studying at U.S. universities and colleges.¹⁰

Gender Issues, Minority Relations, and Human Rights

The late King Abdullah recognized women's right to vote and stand as candidates in 2015 municipal council elections and expanded the size of the national Shura Council to include 30 women in the current session. These moves, while controversial in the kingdom, have been seen by some outsiders as signs that managed, limited political and social reforms are possible. Many gender-rights issues remain subject to domestic debate and international scrutiny: Saudi women continue to face restrictions on travel and employment; male guardianship rules continue to restrict their social and personal autonomy; and Saudi officials regularly detain, fine, or arrest individuals associated with protests by advocates for Saudi women's right to drive automobiles and travel freely.

The most recent (2013) U.S. State Department report on human rights in the kingdom identifies "a lack of equal rights for women" in the kingdom, and states that, despite conditions in which "discrimination based on widespread gender segregation excluded women from many aspects of public life ... women increasingly participated in political life, albeit with significantly less status than men did." In April 2015, King Salman removed the highest-ranking female government minister, Deputy Education Minister Norah al Faiz. The kingdom also confirmed that upcoming municipal elections would allow women to vote and stand as candidates for the first time, in line with a change announced by King Abdullah.

Periodic clashes involving the Shia minority in the oil-rich Eastern Province (see Ash Sharqiyah in **Figure 1** above) and low-level protests by students and families of security and political detainees create continuing strains on public order and overall stability. Saudi authorities continue to pursue a list of young Shia individuals wanted in connection with protests and clashes with security forces in the Eastern Province. Saudi courts have handed down lengthy jail terms and travel bans for Shia protestors and activists accused of participating in protests and attacking security force personnel. A Saudi security force officer was killed at a checkpoint in the Eastern Province in December 2014, and another officer was killed and others injured in reported gun battles in the province in April 2015. Tensions have been high in light of ongoing protests by some Shiite residents of the region, the death sentence given to opposition Shiite cleric Nimr al Nimr on terrorism and incitement charges in October 2014, and an Islamic State-linked attack described below.

Saudi authorities also have moved to restrict the activities of groups and individuals advocating for political change and campaigning on behalf of individuals detained for political or security reasons, including advocates for the rights of terrorism suspects. In March 2013, Saudi authorities convicted two prominent human rights activists and advocates for detainee rights, Mohammed al Qahtani and Abdullah al Hamid, on a range of charges, including "breaking allegiance" to the king.¹¹ Some young Saudis who have produced social media videos criticizing the government

¹⁰ Abdul Hannan Tago, "King's scholarship program takes U.S. ties to a new level," *Arab News* (Jeddah) May 9, 2014.

¹¹ According to Amnesty International, the defendants were convicted on charges including "breaking allegiance to and disobeying the ruler, questioning the integrity of officials, seeking to disrupt security and inciting disorder by calling (continued...)

and socioeconomic conditions in the kingdom have reportedly been arrested. At the same time, the late King Abdullah moved to restrict and redefine some of the responsibilities and powers of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, often referred to by non-Saudis as “religious police,” in response to public concerns.

A series of other prominent arrests and public punishments have attracted attention to contentious social and human rights issues in recent months. Women’s rights activists Loujain Hathloul and Maysa al Amoudi were detained at the Saudi-UAE border in December for attempting to drive and publicizing their efforts and detention using social media. Their cases were referred to the Specialized Criminal Court (also referred to as the terrorism court), where cases involving those accused of “undermining social cohesion” are tried. Both were released in February 2015. In January 2015, Saudi blogger Raif Badawi began receiving public flogging punishments following his conviction for “insulting Islam,” a charge levied in response to Badawi’s establishment of a website critical of certain Saudi religious figures and practices. Badawi was sentenced in May 2014 to 1,000 lashes (to be administered in 20 sessions of 50 lashes) and 10 years in prison. After the first session, his subsequent punishments were delayed for medical reasons, and the case has caused disruptions in Saudi Arabia’s bilateral relationships with some European governments pressing for Badawi’s release.

Terrorism Threats and Bilateral Cooperation

The Saudi Arabian government views Al Qaeda, its affiliates, other Salafist-Jihadist groups, and their supporters as direct threats to Saudi national security and has taken increased action since 2014 to prevent Saudis from travelling abroad in support of extremist groups or otherwise supporting armed extremists. The aggressive expansion of the terrorist insurgent group known as the Islamic State in neighboring Iraq and in Syria has raised Saudi Arabia’s level of concern about the group, and may be leading the Saudis to seek stronger partnerships with the United States, select Syrian opposition forces, Iraqi Sunnis, and select regional countries. Saudi leaders also seek regional and U.S. support for their efforts to confront what they describe as Iranian efforts to destabilize Yemen through support for the *Ansar Allah/Houthi* movement (see “Saudi Military Campaigns and Policy in Yemen” below).

Recent State Department reports have credited the Saudi government with working to preserve “a strong counterterrorism relationship with the United States” characterized by “enhanced bilateral cooperation.”¹² Saudi and U.S. officials have stated that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), based in Yemen and led by Saudi nationals, constitutes the leading terrorist threat to the kingdom. The State Department has assessed that AQAP has “continued its efforts to inspire sympathizers to support, finance, or engage in conflicts outside of Saudi Arabia and encouraged individual acts of terrorism within the Kingdom.”¹³ In July 2014, AQAP reportedly attacked a remote Saudi-Yemeni border checkpoint, killing and wounding Saudi security officers. It is unclear whether the Islamic State may pose an even greater ideological and security threat to the kingdom’s stability.

(...continued)

for demonstrations, disseminating false information to foreign groups and forming an unlicensed organization.” Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia punishes two activists for voicing opinion,” March 11, 2013.

¹² U.S. State Department Bureau of Counterterrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism 2013, April 2014.

¹³ Ibid.

The Islamic State and Related Security Issues

The late King Abdullah's January 2015 address to the consultative Shura Council (delivered at the time by now-King Salman) cited "extremely sensitive and delicate international and regional conditions" and pledged to continue the kingdom's uncompromising approach to those seeking to undermine security and unity in Saudi Arabia. Attacks on border personnel and facilities (presumably by Islamic State fighters) along the Iraqi border in July 2014 and January 2015 drew new attention to the threat of potential infiltration and attacks from violent extremists in Iraq. Saudi officials linked the Islamic State to an attack on Saudi Shiites in the Eastern Province village of Dalwa in November 2014 that killed 8 people and wounded 13 others. Security forces detained more than 75 people in connection with the attack, including dozens who had been imprisoned in the past or were facing trial for terrorism charges. Following the attack, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi released a message threatening the kingdom and calling on the group's supporters there to attack Shiites, Saudi security forces, and foreigners.¹⁴ Shootings of police officers in Riyadh in 2015 have been linked by Saudi authorities to Saudi Islamic State supporters. In May 2014, the Saudi Interior Ministry estimated that at least 1,200 Saudis had travelled to fight in Syria, and some independent estimates suggest the figure may be more than 2,500 Saudis.¹⁵

The April 2015 arrest of more than 90 Saudi and foreign suspects in connection with alleged IS plots drew new attention to the potential for IS-related terror attacks in the kingdom. According to Saudi officials, some among those arrested planned to attack the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh. U.S. diplomatic facilities closed temporarily in March 2015 in connection with possible attack information. As noted above, U.S. officials continue to warn of the potential for attacks on U.S. persons and facilities in the kingdom, along with other Western and Saudi targets.

Saudi military forces are listed as participants in coalition air strike operations against the Islamic State in Syria, and Saudi officials have agreed to host aspects of a new U.S. training program for vetted Syrian opposition members and other vetted Syrians. Saudi officials may prefer that efforts to expand training and assistance focus on increasing pressure on pro-Asad forces rather than on defending opposition-held areas. On the diplomatic front, Saudi officials have welcomed Iraqi government officials in Riyadh following the change in leadership from Nouri al Maliki to Hayder al Abadi in Baghdad, and Saudi Arabia has renewed plans to reopen its embassy in Iraq. Saudi officials have offered more than \$500 million in humanitarian assistance to displaced Iraqis, and some regional media outlets speculate that the kingdom may offer expanded assistance to Iraqi Sunni tribal fighters organized to fight the Islamic State under the auspices of the Baghdad government's planned operations in Al Anbar Province.

¹⁴ Baghdadi said, "O sons of al Haramayn [the two holy mosques]...O people of tawhid [monotheism]... O people of wala' and bara' [allegiance and disavowal]... the serpent's head and the stronghold of the disease are beside you. Thus, draw your swords and break their sheaths. Divorce the Dunya [world], for there will be no security nor rest for Al Salul [derogatory term for the Saudi royal family] and their soldiers after today. There is no place for the mushrikin [polytheists] in the peninsula of Mohammed. Draw your swords. Deal with the rafidah [Rejectionists, derogatory term for Shiites] first, wherever you find them, then Al Salul and their soldiers before the Crusaders and their bases. Deal with the rafidah, Al Salul, and their soldiers. Dismember their limbs. Snatch them as groups and individuals. Embitter their lives and make them occupied with themselves instead of us. Be patient and do not hasten. Soon—in sha'allah [God willing]—the vanguards of the Islamic State will reach you." U.S. Government Open Source Center Report TRR2014111361251279, "ISIL Amir Al-Baghdadi Accepts Pledges of Allegiance, Announces 'Expansion' to Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Twitter in English, Arabic November 13, 2014.

¹⁵ Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, The Soufan Group, June 2014.

Terrorist Financing and Material Support: Concerns and Responses

According to U.S. government sources, financial support for terrorism from Saudi individuals likely remains a serious threat to the kingdom and the international community, even though the Saudi government has “affirmed its commitment to combating terrorist fundraising and sought to further establish itself as a regional leader in disrupting terrorist finance efforts.”¹⁶ Saudi authorities have forbidden Saudi citizens from travelling to Syria to fight and have taken steps to limit the flow of privately raised funds from Saudis to armed Sunni groups and charitable organizations in Syria. Nevertheless, references by some Saudi officials and clerics to genocide against Syrian Sunnis and foreign invasion by Iran and Hezbollah may contribute to apparent popular perceptions of the crisis in Syria as one that demands action by Saudi individuals.

In January 2014, the kingdom issued a decree setting prison sentences for Saudis who may be found to have travelled abroad to fight with extremist groups, including tougher sentences for any members of the military who may be found to have done so. The decree was followed by the release in March of new counterterrorism regulations under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior outlawing support for terrorist organizations including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State as well as organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁷ The regulations have drawn scrutiny and criticism from human rights advocates concerned about further restrictions of civil liberties.

In August 2014, Saudi Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdelaziz bin Abdullah bin Mohammed Al al Shaykh declared “the ideas of extremism … and terrorism” to be the “first enemies of Muslims,” and stated that all efforts to combat Al Qaeda and the Islamic State were required and allowed because those groups “consider Muslims to be infidels.”¹⁸ The statement, coupled with state crackdowns on clerics deviating from the government’s anti-terrorism messaging, appears to signal the kingdom’s desire to undercut claims by the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and their followers that support for the groups and their violent attacks is religiously legitimate.

In conjunction with the government’s expanded efforts to dissuade Saudi citizens from supporting the Islamic State and other extremist groups, Saudi security entities continue to arrest cells of individuals suspected of plotting attacks, recruiting, or fundraising for terrorist groups. In addition to the arrests noted above, in May 2014, security officers announced the arrest of more than 60 individuals as part of what they described as an active terrorist cell with ties to Yemen and Syria, and, in August 2014, officials reportedly raided a small community northwest of the capital in pursuit of individuals suspected of recruiting Saudis to join the Islamic State abroad. On

¹⁶ Ibid. According to a March 2014 State Department report, “Bulk cash smuggling from individual donors and Saudi-based charities has reportedly been a major source of financing to extremist and terrorist groups over the past 25 years. With the advent of tighter bank regulations, funds are reportedly collected and illicitly transferred in cash, often via pilgrims performing Hajj and Umrah. Despite serious and effective efforts to counter the funding of terrorism originating from within its borders, entities in Saudi Arabia likely continue to serve as sources of cash flowing to Sunni-based extremist groups. Some Saudi officials acknowledge difficulty in following the money trail with regard to illicit finance due to the preference for cash transactions in the country and the regulatory challenge posed by *hawalas*. Recent turmoil in Syria and the expanding usage of social media have allowed charities outside of Saudi Arabia with ties to extremists to solicit donations from Saudi donors, a trend that is proving difficult to stop.” U.S. State Department, 2014 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)—Volume II: Money Laundering and Financial Crimes Country Database, March 2014.

¹⁷ Saudi Ministry of Interior, List of the Security and Intellectual Prohibitions for the Citizens and Residents, Saudi Press Agency, March 7, 2014.

¹⁸ OSC Report IML2014081943429793, “Saudi Grand Mufti Issues Statement Saying ISIL, Al-Qa’ida Are ‘Khawarij,’ ‘Primary Enemies’ of Islam,” *Al Sharq* (Dammam), August 19, 2014.

September 1, the kingdom announced the arrest of 88 people suspected of involvement in active terrorist plots, 59 of whom reportedly had been arrested in the past on terrorism related charges.

U.S. Foreign Assistance to Saudi Arabia

The Obama Administration requests appropriations of a small amount of International Military Education and Training assistance funding for Saudi Arabia (approximately \$10,000) in its annual budget requests. This nominal amount makes Saudi Arabia eligible for a substantial discount on the millions of dollars of training it purchases through the Foreign Military Sales program.¹⁹ The Administration's FY2016 budget request includes the nominal amount and notes that the program and the related discounts result in increased Saudi participation in U.S. training, opportunities to promote purchases of U.S. weaponry, and improved Saudi capabilities.

In the past, Congress enacted prohibitions on IMET and other foreign assistance to Saudi Arabia in annual appropriations legislation, subject to waiver provisions, and the Bush and Obama Administrations subsequently issued national security waivers enabling the assistance to continue. Saudi officials have been privately critical of the congressional prohibitions and appear to prefer to avoid contentious public debate over U.S. foreign assistance, arms sales, and security cooperation. The overwhelmingly Saudi-funded nature of U.S. training reflects Saudi Arabia's ability to pay for the costly programs. It may also point to a shared view among Saudi leaders and successive U.S. Administrations that U.S.-funded training programs for Saudis would be more vulnerable to potential congressional scrutiny and pressure.

Arms Sales and Security Training

A series of high-value U.S. proposed arms sales to Saudi Arabia have been announced in the wake of the 2010 announcement that the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) would reconstitute and expand its main fighter forces with advanced U.S. F-15 aircraft (see **Table 1** below). The F-15 sale will perpetuate the reliance of the RSAF (the elite military service in the country) on material and training support provided by the U.S. military and U.S. defense contractors.

The RSAF sale and others will guide the immediate future of the United States Military Training Mission (USMTM) in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program (PM- SANG), which have been active under special bilateral agreements and funded by Saudi purchases since the 1950s and 1970s, respectively. The sales would considerably improve Saudi military capabilities, and appear to be seen by decision makers in both countries as symbolic commitments to cooperation during a period of generational leadership change.

¹⁹ The Administration argues that the discount supports continued Saudi participation in U.S. training programs and this participation supports the maintenance of important military-to-military relationships and improves Saudi capabilities. The conference report for H.R. 3288 (H.Rept. 111-366) required the Administration to report to Congress within 180 days (by June 14, 2010) on the net savings this eligibility provides to Saudi Arabia and other IMET recipients.

Table I. Proposed Major U.S. Defense Sales to Saudi Arabia
October 2010 to October 2014, \$ billion

Formal Notification Date	System	Recipient Force	Estimated Cost
October 2010	F-15 Sales, Upgrades, Weaponry and Training	RSAF	\$29.400
October 2010	APACHE, BLACKHAWK, AH-6i, and MD-530F Helicopters	SANG	\$25.600
October 2010	APACHE Longbow Helicopters	RSLF	\$3.300
October 2010	APACHE Longbow Helicopters	Royal Guard	\$2.200
November 2010	JAVELIN Missiles and Launch Units	—	\$0.071
May 2011	Night Vision and Thermal Weapons Sights	RSLF	\$0.330
June 2011	CBU-105D/B Sensor Fuzed Weapons	RSAF	\$0.355
June 2011	Light Armored Vehicles	—	\$0.263
June 2011	Light Armored Vehicles	SANG	\$0.350
September 2011	Howitzers, Fire Finder Radar, Ammunition, HMMWVs	—	\$0.886
October 2011	Up-Armored HMMWVs	RSLF	\$0.033
December 2011	PATRIOT Systems Engineering Services	—	\$0.120
August 2012	RSAF Follow-on Support	RSAF	\$0.850
August 2012	Link-16 Systems and ISR Equipment and Training	RSAF	\$0.257
November 2012	C-130J-30 Aircraft and KC-130J Air Refueling Aircraft	RSAF	\$6.700
November 2012	RSLF Parts, Equipment, and Support	RSLF	\$0.300
November 2012	PATRIOT (PAC-2) Missiles Recertification	RSADF	\$0.130
June 2013	SANG Modernization Program Extension	SANG	\$4.000
July 2013	Mark V Patrol Boats	RSNF	\$1.200
August 2013	RSAF Follow-on Support	RSAF	\$1.200
October 2013	U.S. Military Training Mission (USMTM) Program Support Services	MOD	\$0.090
October 2013	SLAM-ER, JSOW, Harpoon Block II, GBU-39/B Munitions	RSAF	\$6.800
November 2013	C4I System Upgrades and Maintenance	RSNF	\$1.100
December 2013	TOW 2A and 2B Missiles	RSLF	\$0.170
December 2013	TOW 2A and 2B RF Missiles	SANG	\$0.900
April 2014	Facilities Security Forces- Training and Advisory Group (FSF-TAG) Support Services	MOI	\$0.080
August 2014	AWACS Modernization	RSAF	\$2.000
October 2014	Patriot Air Defense System with PAC-3 enhancement	—	\$1.750
Total			\$90.435

Source: U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA).

Notes: Includes proposed sales to Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF), Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF), Royal Guard, Royal Saudi Air Defense Force (RSADF), Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF), Ministry of Interior (MOI), and Ministry of Defense (MOD). Dashes indicate unspecified recipient force in DSCA public notice.

U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism and internal security cooperation has expanded since 2008, when a bilateral technical cooperation agreement was signed establishing a U.S.-interagency critical infrastructure protection advisory mission to the kingdom. Modeled loosely on embedded advisory and technology transfer programs of the U.S.-Saudi Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation, the Office of the Program Manager-Ministry of Interior (OPM-MOI) is a Saudi-funded, U.S.-staffed senior advisory mission that provides embedded U.S. advisors to key industrial, energy, maritime, and cyber security offices within the Saudi government. In parallel to these ministry advisory efforts, the United States Military Training Mission also oversees a Saudi-funded Training and Advisory Group supporting the Ministry of Interior's Facilities Security Force (FSF-TAG), which protects key infrastructure locations.

Consensus and Contention in Regional Affairs

Close U.S.-Saudi security cooperation continues in parallel with apparent U.S.-Saudi differences of strategic opinion on some regional security threats and over some preferred responses. President Obama's March 2014 visit to Riyadh occurred in the midst of rising international speculation about reportedly growing differences between U.S. and Saudi leaders on key issues, most notably the conflict in Syria, Iran's nuclear program, and U.S. policy toward Egypt. Many of those issues—in addition to political-military developments in Yemen and campaigns against the Islamic State and other violent extremists—remain prominent in on the U.S.-Saudi policy agenda.

Saudi Arabia and Iran

Iran's regional policies and nuclear program are the focal point for many of Saudi Arabia's current security concerns and thus are a focal point for Saudi-U.S. cooperation and debate. Statements by some Saudi leaders suggest that they see Iran's policies as part of an expansionist, sectarian agenda aimed at empowering Shia Muslims in the region at the expense of Sunnis. Iranian leaders attribute similarly sectarian motives to their Saudi counterparts and remain critical of GCC cooperation with the United States. Saudi leaders are particularly critical of Iranian support for the government of Bashar al Asad in Syria, where Saudi Arabia supports anti-Asad groups and favored U.S. military intervention in response to chemical weapons use by pro-Asad forces in August 2013. Saudi support for the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain and antipathy toward former Iraqi prime minister Nuri al Maliki and pro-Iranian Shia militia reflects similar Saudi suspicion of Iranian intentions and the sympathies of broader Shia communities. Saudi leaders also have been critical of U.S. attempts to pressure Bahraini leaders to accommodate the demands of Bahrain's largely Shia opposition. Although Yemen's Zaydi Shia population differs markedly in its beliefs, background, and makeup from larger Twelver Shia populations in Iran and the kingdom, Saudi Arabia nevertheless has described the predominantly Zaydi Ansar Allah/Houthi movement as partner of Iran's in a plot to destabilize Yemen and the kingdom (see below).

Saudi officials have responded relatively positively to agreements associated with U.S. and other P5+1 members' negotiation with Iran over its nuclear program, while remaining skeptical of Iran's intentions. The Saudi cabinet described the 2013 interim nuclear agreement with Iran as

a primary step towards a comprehensive solution to the Iranian nuclear program, as long as good intentions are provided and as long as it concludes in a Middle East and Gulf region

free of all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. The Kingdom hopes that such a step will be followed by more important steps leading to a guarantee of the right for all countries in the region to peacefully use nuclear energy.²⁰

Saudi leaders have used a similar formulation in response to the March 2015 announcement that a political framework had been agreed to for reaching a final agreement with Iran, but have emphasized the broader context of concern that they have about Iranian regional policies:

On the framework agreement that was reached in the city of Lausanne, Switzerland, between the major powers and Iran over its nuclear program, the Council of Ministers expressed hope that a final, binding and definitive agreement would be reached leading to the strengthening of security and stability in the region and the world. The cabinet renewed support by the kingdom for peaceful solutions based on ensuring the right of states of region in the peaceful use of nuclear energy in accordance with the standards and procedures of the International Atomic Energy Agency and under its supervision and in line with the Arab League's decision aimed at making the Middle East and the Arab Gulf region free of all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. In this regard, the cabinet stressed that the promotion of security and stability in the region requires a commitment to the principles of good neighborliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries and respect of their sovereignty.²¹

On March 24, 2015, then-Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal said Saudi Arabia viewed the negotiations as a means to limit a potential threat to regional and international security, "particularly in light of the aggressive policies pursued by Iran in the region and ongoing interventions in the affairs of the Arab countries and its endeavors to stir up sectarian conflict."²² He further said, "It is not possible to grant Iran deals which it does not deserve in contrast."

Many observers speculate about how Saudi Arabian leaders would respond to an outcome of negotiations with Iran that they viewed as inadequate or any perceived failings by Iran or the United States to live up to their commitments as outlined in a final agreement. Specifically, analysts continue to debate whether the kingdom would seek to acquire its own nuclear weapons capability or a formal nuclear guarantee if Iran moved toward creating a nuclear weapon or retained the capability to do so without sufficient constraints or warning. Saudi officials also may fear that closer U.S.-Iranian relations could undermine the basis for close Saudi-U.S. relations and empower Iran to be more assertive in the Gulf region and the broader Middle East. Saudi-Iranian differences over Syria and Iraq and U.S. policy debates over solutions to conflicts there may be critical in this regard.

Saudi Military Campaigns and Policy in Yemen

Saudi Arabia has long exercised a strong role in Yemen, seeking to mitigate potential threats to the kingdom through liaison relationships and security interventions. Saudi officials expressed increasing concern about developments in Yemen over the course of 2014, as the Saudi and GCC-backed transition process stalled and an alliance of northern Yemen-based insurgents and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh grew more aggressive in their attempts to coerce

²⁰ Saudi Cabinet Statement, November 25, 2013.

²¹ Saudi Cabinet Statement, April 6, 2015.

²² Saudi Arabian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal's Introductory Remarks to the Joint Press Conference with British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, March 24, 2015.

transitional President Abed Rabbo Mansour al Hadi.²³ Some analysts have viewed Saudi support for President Hadi and the transition since 2011 as a hedge against potential threats to Saudi interests posed by a broad range of Yemeni political forces and armed movements, including the ousted Saleh and his disgruntled supporters; the northern Yemen-based, Zaydi Shiite *Ansar Allah* movement (Partisans of God, aka Houthi movement);²⁴ the tribal and Sunni Islamist supporters of the *Islah* (Reform) movement; and armed Salafi-jihadists, including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.²⁵ Saudi air, ground, and border forces fought Houthi militia members in late 2009 in a campaign that ejected Houthi fighters who had crossed the Saudi border, but failed to defeat the movement or end the potential threat it posed to Saudi interests in Yemen.

In mid-2014, pro-Saleh and Houthi forces took control of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, and, in late September, they continued military operations in contravention of an agreed power-sharing arrangement with the Hadi government. In response, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal warned the U.N. General Assembly that the conflict in Yemen would “undoubtedly escalate and threaten the security and stability at the regional and international levels, and “could even reach a stage of no return regardless of the efforts and resources used to avoid such a situation.”²⁶ In October 2014, the U.S. State Department encouraged Yemenis to implement the September agreement peacefully and called for an inclusive resumption of the transition.²⁷

Houthi forces’ unwillingness to withdraw from the capital and unilateral moves by Houthi leaders and Saleh supporters to circumvent Hadi’s authority precipitated a crisis that culminated in the outbreak of renewed conflict and Hadi’s resignation and de facto house arrest in January 2015. Houthi leaders announced a new governance plan in February and in March launched an offensive against pro-Hadi forces in central and southern Yemen, prompting the Saudi Foreign Minister to decry “the serious escalation in Yemen—carried out by an Al Houthi militia coup against constitutional legitimacy.”²⁸ Days later, as Houthi forces advanced on the southern city of Aden, Saudi Arabia and members of a coalition launched air strikes in response to a specific request from President Hadi “to provide instant support by all necessary means, including military intervention to protect Yemen and its people from continuous Houthi aggression and deter the expected attack to occur at any hour on the city of Aden and the rest of the southern regions, and to help Yemen in the face of Al Qaeda and ISIL.”²⁹

²³ For background on Yemen, its transition process, conflict there, and U.S. Policy, see CRS Report RL34170, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

²⁴ The *Ansar Allah* movement is a predominantly Zaydi Shiite revivalist political and insurgent movement that formed in the northern province of Sa’da in 2004 under the leadership of members of the Al Houthi family. It originally sought an end to what it viewed as efforts to marginalize Zaydi communities and beliefs, but its goals grew in scope and ambition in the wake of the 2011 uprising and government collapse to embrace a broader populist, anti-establishment message. Members of its Zaydi Shiite base of support are closer in their beliefs to Sunni Muslims than most other Shiites, and some Yemeni observers argue that the motives of the Houthi movement are evolving to include new political and social goals that cannot be explained strictly in sectarian terms. Skeptics highlight the movement’s ideological roots, its alleged cooperation with Iran, and the slogans prominently displayed on its banners: “God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory to Islam!”

²⁵ See, for example, International Crisis Group, “The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa,” June 10, 2014.

²⁶ Statement of His Royal Highness Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Before the United Nations General Assembly, 69th Regular Session, September 27, 2014.

²⁷ Office of the State Department Spokesperson, Taken Question on Yemen, Washington, DC, October 31, 2014.

²⁸ Minister of Foreign Affairs Stresses Depth of Historical and Strong Relations Between Saudi Arabia and Britain

²⁹ Text of Hadi request letter in “GCC statement: Gulf countries respond to Yemen developments,” *The National* (UAE), March 26, 2015.

The Obama Administration announced its support for Hadi and the provision of logistical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations “in support of GCC actions to defend against Houthi violence.” A joint U.S.-Saudi planning cell also was established to coordinate the provision of military and intelligence support for the campaign, and the provision of U.S. assistance reportedly has been adjusted over time to allow for U.S. vetting of Saudi-chosen targets.³⁰ *Ansar Allah* leader Abdel Malik Al Houthi has lashed out at the Saudi-led operation as “aggression” against Yemenis and blamed the United States, alleging: “The Americans determine targeting of every child, residential compound, house, home, shop, market, or mosque targeted in this country. They determined for the Saudi regime the targets to hit. Then, they supervised and ran the striking operation. Therefore, the Saudi regime is a soldier and servant of the Americans.”³¹ Press reports citing unnamed U.S. officials suggest that U.S. advice and assistance has been intended to support the Saudi campaign, but to limit its potential scope and duration. In one discussion about the campaign with King Salman, the leaders discussed “the importance of responding to the humanitarian needs of the Yemeni people.”³²

A Saudi military spokesman indicated that the immediate goals of Operation Storm of Determination (also called Decisive Storm in media accounts) were focused on eliminating specific potential military threats emanating from Yemen. Initial air strikes targeted ballistic missiles, air defense systems, Houthi formations near the Saudi border, command and control elements, and air force infrastructure seized by Houthi and pro-Saleh forces. More broadly, Saudi authorities stated that the campaign’s goals included “ensuring the return of the state to extend its authority over all Yemeni territories, the return of the arms to the state, and non-threatening of the security of neighboring states.”³³ The Saudi military stated “the ultimate aim” was “to restore the legitimate government of Yemen to power.”³⁴

Some international observers viewed these goals as overly ambitious for an air-only campaign and questioned the likelihood that the Saudi-led, U.S.-facilitated strikes could achieve those outcomes directly.³⁵ As the campaign continued, reports of civilian casualties and displacement, advances by AQAP forces, and persistence by the Houthis and their pro-Saleh allies fueled some international criticism of Saudi policy.³⁶ Saudi officials blamed their adversaries for reported civilian deaths and announced a shift in their goals and operations on April 22, stating that specific threat targets had been eliminated and the goals of their initial operation had been achieved. Saudi officials said that a new operation, named Restoring Hope, would focus on efforts to support a return to negotiations and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance. U.S. officials welcomed the announcement and said “we look forward to a shift from military operations to the rapid, unconditional resumption of all-party negotiations” and to the operational

³⁰ Maria Abi-Habib and Adam Entous, “U.S. Widens Role in Saudi-led Campaign Against Houthi Rebels in Yemen,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2015.

³¹ OSC Report IMN201504202277830, “Yemen: Top Huthi Leader Says Israel, US Play Role in Saudi ‘Aggression,’ Vows To Counter ‘Invasion,’” Al-Masirah TV (Beirut) April 19, 2015.

³² The White House, Readout of the President’s Call with King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, April 17, 2015.

³³ Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Chairs Cabinet’s Session, March 30, 2015.

³⁴ MD Al Sulami: “Operation To Continue Till Goals Achieved,” *Arab News* (Jeddah), March 27, 2015.

³⁵ Maria Abi-Habib and Adam Entous, “U.S. Widens Role in Saudi-led Campaign Against Houthi Rebels in Yemen,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2015.

³⁶ Ahmed Al Omran, Asa Fitch, and Adam Entous, “Saudi-Led Coalition Announces End of Yemen Military Operation,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2015.

shift “significantly increasing the opportunities for international and Yemeni humanitarian organizations to access and deliver assistance to the Yemeni people.”³⁷

Nevertheless, Saudi military operations continued to strike Houthi and pro-Saleh positions across Yemen in the wake of the announcement. On April 24, a Saudi military spokesman told Egyptian media that the Houthis and others had misunderstood the implications of the announced operational shift: Saudi strikes were continuing, he stated, because the Houthis and others had made military advances following the Saudi announcement that it would respond to any such advances against pro-Hadi forces. According to the spokesman, “there will not be any military operations, unless the Houthi militias carry out movements on the ground.”³⁸ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216 (April 2015) demands that the Houthis “immediately and unconditionally” end the use of violence and urges all parties to agree to conditions that will allow for an end to violence and the resumption of “inclusive” U.N.-brokered talks.

Egypt and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

With regard to Egypt, Saudi Arabia was critical of what it described as a U.S. failure to back a longtime ally when former President Hosni Mubarak initially came under pressure to resign in 2011. The Saudis later embraced the Egyptian military’s July 2013 ouster of the elected government led by Mohammed Morsi, who was affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and offered billions of dollars in financial assistance to the military-backed government. Some Saudi officials publicly promised to replace any U.S. assistance withheld in protest of the military’s actions. Some leading Saudi clerics defied the government’s embrace of the Egyptian military’s move, illustrating the potential for rifts among the government, some members of the religious establishment, and their respective supporters. Saudi financial and political support to Morsi’s successor and his government have continued, and King Salman sought and obtained Egyptian support for Saudi military operations in Yemen, although as of late April 2015, no large-scale Egyptian military deployments in conjunction with the Saudi operations had been reported.

Shared antipathy to the Iranian government’s policies, parallel cooperation with the United States, and shared terrorism concerns do not appear to have contributed to closer Saudi-Israeli ties in recent years. Saudi Arabia remains a vocal advocate for the Palestinian cause and statements by Saudi officials are routinely critical of Israeli policy. Nevertheless, the late King Abdullah remained committed to the terms of the peace initiative he put forward under the auspices of the Arab League in 2002, which calls for normalization of Arab relations with Israel if Israel were to (1) withdraw fully from the territories it occupied in 1967, (2) agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem, and provide for the (3) “[a]chievement of a just solution to the Palestinian Refugee problem in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194.”³⁹

³⁷ Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan, April 22, 2015.

³⁸ OSC Report IMN2015042541340921, “Egypt: Decisive Storm Spokesman Says Military Operations in Yemen Decided Based on Huthis’ Movements,” Al-Qahirah wa al-Nas (Cairo), April 24, 2015.

³⁹ In April 2013, representatives of the Arab League agreed that land swaps could be an element of a conflict-ending agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. However, in early 2014, Arab foreign ministers reportedly informed Secretary of State John Kerry that they will “not accept Israel as a Jewish state nor compromise on Palestinian sovereignty in Jerusalem.” Elhanan Miller, “Arab ministers back Abbas in rejecting ‘Jewish’ Israel,” *Times of Israel*, January 13, 2014.

However, Saudi authorities vociferously criticized Israeli conduct during the summer 2014 Gaza war with Hamas, condemning what they described as “Israeli inhuman aggression” and pledging Saudi support “to the Palestinian brothers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to alleviate the difficult conditions in which they live because of the Israeli aggression and terrorism.”⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia supports the international recognition of a Palestinian state and full Palestinian membership at the United Nations. Following a November 20, 2013, meeting with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, then-Crown Prince and now-King Salman bin Abdulaziz released a statement renewing:

the kingdom’s firm stance in support of the Palestinian cause until the Palestinian people regain all their occupied territories, including Al-Quds [Jerusalem]. The Crown Prince expressed the kingdom’s condemnation of all Israeli plans to build settlements, stressing that these schemes constitute an obstacle to peace, a flagrant violation of the resolutions of international legitimacy, and a blatant attack on the firm legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.⁴¹

In response to March 2015 statements by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that cast doubt on Netanyahu’s support for a “two state solution” to the conflict, then-Foreign Minister Saudi al Faisal said,

The Kingdom considered the Prime Minister [of] the Zionist entity’s statements and commitments regarding not establishment of the Palestinian state in his era as a flagrant challenge to the international will and principles of its legitimacy, resolutions and agreements. In this regard, the international community should fulfill its responsibilities towards these aggressive policies if we really want to reach a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the conflict, restoration of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and establishment of an independent and viable state.⁴²

On April 6, the Saudi cabinet welcomed the International Criminal Court’s acceptance of “the State of Palestine as a full member,” saying it “strengthens its presence in the international field to preserve the rights of the Palestinian people.” Saudi authorities declined a seat on the United Nations Security Council in October 2013, citing their views of its “double standards” and general “inability to carry out its duties and assume its responsibilities.” Saudi officials have called for “profound and comprehensive reform” of the Council, including “abandoning the veto system or restricting its use” and “expanded membership of the Council that includes permanent seats for Arab States, African States and other under-represented groups.”⁴³

U.S.-Saudi Trade and Energy Issues

Saudi Arabia remained the largest U.S. trading partner in the Middle East in 2014.⁴⁴ According to the U.S. International Trade Administration, Saudi exports to the United States in 2013 were

⁴⁰ Saudi Press Agency (Riyadh), Deputy Crown Prince Chairs Cabinet’s Session, August 18, 2014.

⁴¹ Saudi Press Agency, “Crown Prince Receives Palestinian President,” November 20, 2013.

⁴² Saudi Arabian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal’s Introductory Remarks to the Joint Press Conference with British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, March 24, 2015.

⁴³ Statement of Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations, November 8, 2013.

⁴⁴ Comparable 2014 figures for Israel, the second-largest U.S. trading partner in the Middle East, were more than \$23 billion in exports to the United States and more than \$15 billion in U.S. exports to Israel. U.S. exports to the United Arab Emirates in 2014 are estimated at more than \$22.1 billion.

worth more than \$47 billion (up more than \$25 billion from 2009 but below the 2008 figure of \$54.8 billion). In 2014, U.S. exports to Saudi Arabia were valued at more than \$18.6 billion (down slightly from 2013, but up roughly \$8 billion since 2009). To a considerable extent, the high value of U.S.-Saudi trade is dictated by U.S. imports of hydrocarbons from Saudi Arabia and U.S. exports of weapons, machinery, and vehicles to Saudi Arabia. Fluctuations in the volume and value of U.S.-Saudi oil trade account for declines in the value of Saudi exports to the United States in some recent years. Declines in global oil prices from their early 2014 highs have had a pronounced effect on the value of Saudi exports to the United States.

Since Saudi Arabia remains dependent on oil export revenues for much of its national budget, these trends have been viewed with some mild public and official concern in the kingdom. Rising demand in South and East Asia is expected to compensate for declining oil imports in North America in coming years, and Saudi officials appear committed to preserving and expanding their share of Asian oil markets. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, as of mid-April 2015, Saudi Arabia was the second-largest source of U.S. crude oil imports, providing about 1.1 million barrels per day (mbd) of the 7.53 mbd in gross U.S. crude imports, behind only Canada.⁴⁵ As of 2013, oil exports to the United States accounted for roughly 15% of Saudi exports, with East Asia accounting for more than 68%.⁴⁶

In early 2015, Saudi Arabia produced an average of more than 10 mbd of its estimated 12.5 mbd capacity and had indicated that it may not expand that capacity in light of current trends in international oil markets. In August 2014, Saudi Aramco's chief executive outlined the company's plans for future investment, saying, "Although our investments will span the value chain, the bulk will be in upstream, and increasingly from offshore, with the aim of maintaining our maximum sustained oil production capacity at twelve million barrels per day, while also doubling our gas production."⁴⁷

By some estimates, the volume of oil consumed in Saudi Arabia may exceed oil exports by 2030 if domestic energy consumption patterns do not change.⁴⁸ Some analysts have suggested that Saudi leaders could avoid the risks posed by this scenario by adopting "tough policy reforms in areas such as domestic pricing of energy and taxation, an aggressive commitment to alternative energy sources, especially solar and nuclear power, and increasing the Kingdom's share of global oil production."⁴⁹ However, subsidy changes and taxation are viewed as politically sensitive given the lack of popular representation in the kingdom's government. In July 2014, International Monetary Fund (IMF) directors said, "an upward adjustment in energy prices would support a strong fiscal position and the efficient use of energy. The price adjustment should be well-planned and communicated, while ensuring that vulnerable groups are not adversely affected."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Based on EIA data – "Weekly Imports & Exports: Crude" and "Weekly Preliminary Crude Imports by Country of Origin – Four Week Average," April 10, 2015.

⁴⁶ EIA Country Analysis Brief—Saudi Arabia, February 2013.

⁴⁷ Arab News (Jeddah), "Saudi Aramco CEO: Oil industry 'needs timely investments,'" August 26, 2014.

⁴⁸ Glada Lahn and Paul Stevens, *Burning Oil to Keep Cool: The Hidden Energy Crisis in Saudi Arabia*, Chatham House (UK), December 2011; and, John Sfakianakis, "Saudi Arabia's Essential Oil," *Foreign Affairs*, January 8, 2014.

⁴⁹ Brad Bourland and Paul Gemble, "Saudi Arabia's coming oil and fiscal challenge," Jadwa Investments, July 2011.

⁵⁰ IMF 2014 Article IV Consultation with Saudi Arabia, Press Release No. 14/356, July 21, 2014.

Outlook

As described above, Saudi Arabia has close defense and security ties with the United States anchored by long-standing military training programs and supplemented by ongoing high-value weapons sales and new critical infrastructure security cooperation and counterterrorism initiatives. These ties would be difficult and costly for either side to fully break or replace. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria presents new shared risks and new opportunities for expanded security partnership. King Salman has warned of the shared threat posed by the Islamic State and has called for joint action to combat it. Nevertheless, differences in preferred tactics and methods may continue to complicate bilateral coordination on regional security issues, including on action against the Islamic State and other terrorist groups. Saudi officials have expressed frustration with some recent U.S. policy decisions and pursued an independent course on some issues, but, at present, leaders on both sides of the bilateral relationship appear fundamentally committed to maintaining U.S.-Saudi partnership.

Appendix. Historical Background

The modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the third state established in the Arabian Peninsula since the end of the 18th century based on the hereditary rule of members of the Al Saud family. In the mid-18th century, a local alliance developed between the Al Saud and the members of a puritanical Sunni Islamic religious movement led by a cleric named Mohammed ibn Abd Al Wahhab. The Saudi-Wahhabi alliance built two states in the Arabian Peninsula during the next century that eventually collapsed under pressure from outside powers and inter- and intra-family rivalries.

During the first quarter of the 20th century, an Al Saud chieftain named Abd al Aziz ibn Abd al Rahman Al Saud (commonly referred to as Ibn Saud) used force to unify much of the Arabian Peninsula under a restored Al Saud state. Ibn Saud's forces overcame numerous tribal rivals with the support of an armed Wahhabi contingent known as the Ikhwan (or brotherhood), and, at times, with the financial and military backing of the British government. By 1932, King Abd al Aziz and his armies had crushed an Ikhwan revolt, consolidated control over most of the Arabian Peninsula, and declared the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Six of Ibn Saud's sons—Kings Saud, Faisal, Khaled, Fahd, Abdullah, and Salman—have succeeded him as rulers of the Saudi kingdom during the subsequent eight decades. This era has been dominated by the development and export of the kingdom's massive oil resources and the resulting socioeconomic transformation of the country. A series of agreements, statements by successive U.S. Administrations, arms sales, military training arrangements, and military deployments have demonstrated a strong U.S. security commitment to the Saudi monarchy since the 1940s. That security commitment was built on shared economic interests and antipathy to Communism and was tested by regional conflict during the Cold War. It has survived the terrorism-induced strains of the post-Cold War era relatively intact, and appears poised to continue as recently concluded arms sales to Saudi Arabia—the largest in U.S. history—are implemented.

Author Contact Information

Christopher M. Blanchard
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
cblanchard@crs.loc.gov, 7-0428